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DE RUEHBUL #0576/01 0660607
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
R 060607Z MAR 08
FM AMEMBASSY KABUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 3145
INFO RUCNAFG/AFGHANISTAN COLLECTIVE
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUEKJCS/OSD WASHDC
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RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC//JF/UNMA//
RHMFIUU/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL

UNCLAS KABUL 000576

SIPDIS

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STATE PASS TO USAID FOR AID/ANE, AID/DCHA/DG
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SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [AF](#)

SUBJECT: Baghlan, Afghanistan: New Leadership to Address Provincial Challenges

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Since the tragic suicide attack on the Baghlan Sugar Factory on November 6, 2007, the central government has replaced two leading provincial officials and has increased pressure on Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to combat organized crime and insurgent activity. Baghlan is stable and relatively secure, and traffic continues to flow along the Ring Road and to reach the northern and western provinces. Industry is the basis for economic development in the province. It remains to be seen whether the young, newly-appointed and politically-inexperienced governor is able to assert his office's authority.

Security - Fall Out from the Baghlan Sugar Factory Bombing

¶2. (SBU) The attack on the Baghlan Sugar Factory, in which approximately 75 individuals died, shook the provincial government. President Karzai eventually succumbed to pressure from Parliament and replaced the provincial governor and National Directorate of Security (NDS) provincial chief. Both the provincial police chief, who was in Kabul at a police conference at the time of the bombing, and his deputy have retained their positions.

¶3. (SBU) Police and NDS recently conducted an operation targeting organized criminals and insurgents in the province. More than 120 individuals surrendered, likely motivated by previous overnment operations that caused casualties. Among the detained individuals were seven criinalns accused of providing material support for he attack on the sugar factory.

¶4. (SBU) Given the geographic distances between the provincial capital and outlying district centers and its limited number of personnel, the ANSF is reliant upon local elders and communities to maintain stability. The Andarab belt in southeastern Baghlan, the Qandahari belt west of the river, and the border region between Kunduz and Baghlan remain areas of concern due to insurgents, organized crime, and ethnic tension. The ANSF permanent presence has decreased since the abolishment of the highway police and the consolidation of the auxiliary police in Mazar-e Sharif, Balkh province. (Neither Baghlan nor Balkh was ever authorized auxiliary police). The Afghan army does not currently have a permanent presence in the province, although one battalion from the 209 Corps, 2nd Brigade, which will soon be established in Kunduz, is expected to deploy to Pol-e Khomri, the capital of Baghlan.

¶5. (SBU) The provincial police chief, Maulana Syed Khili, is a Tajik

who is a former jihadi and Afghan National Army commander from Parwan province. He served as Parwan's provincial police chief for two years before arriving in Baghlan in 2007. Khili is a fighter with a flair for self-promotion and understands the need to demonstrate results, especially to foreign audiences. The recently-arrived provincial NDS chief Mohammed Daoud is a Tajik originally from Kunduz province. His brother-in-law, Mir Alam, is a former mujahideen commander, a local power broker, and most recently, Baghlan's provincial police chief, who was removed through the rank reform process.

Development - Industrial Towns, Hydro-electric Power and Jitters about Privatization

¶6. (SBU) A drive from Kunduz o Pol-e Khomri highlights Baghlan's industrial focus. Along the route are sugar and cheese factories in Fabrica, a cement plant and coal mine in Pol-e Khomri, hydro-electric plants along the river, and trucks exiting the Salang Pass enroute to Mazar-e Sharif and Kunduz and to Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. While there have been initiatives to strengthen or rehabilitate the industrial concerns, current development efforts are focused on priority sectors such as education and health and reaching some of the more remote or potentially volatile districts such as Tala Wa Barfek, Deh-e Salah, Pal-e Hazar and Baghlan-e Jedid.

¶7. (SBU) A Soviet-style command economy (state-driven investment, government factories) remains the textbook approach to economic development in the minds of some provincial officials. The Provincial Council is very skeptical of privatization, influenced by their experiences with the Baghlan cement plant. (The privatization process was poorly handled and is widely viewed as having been corrupt). They expressed concern about the loss of jobs, as well as the political and economic influences of the Karzai family

(President Karzais brother is CEO of the plant). The PC's exprience with the cement plant has tainted their view as to the importance of private sector development to economic growth.

Governance - A Financially Savvy, but Politically Inexperienced, Governor

¶8. (SBU) Governance in the province has suffered with the frequent rotation of governors (there have been four since 2005). The new Baghlan governor, Abdul Jabar Haqbeen, assumed office at the beginning of January 2008. He is from Baghlan's Nahreen district and graduated from Kabul University's Economics Faculty. He began his career in the banking sector in Kabul, before serving most recently as a finance officer in Baghlan and Kunduz. He is allied with the Melat party, and his patron in Kabul is Finance Minister Ahadi. Haqbeen's youth (he is 30) and his lack of political experience may challenge his stated goals o bringing ethnic harmony, security and projects to the province. Haqbeen's mixed Tajik/Pashtun parentage, however, may assist him in representing the various ethnicities and regional geographic interests.

¶9. (SBU) Tajiks, Pashtuns, Uzbeks, and Hazara are represented in Baghlan's PC, although there is a slight Tajik overrepresentation compared to the population. Three PC members are mullahs. The PC chairman is the charming and well-spoken Mawlawi Sirajudin Seerat, who tends to be critical of the Karzai government. The PC is concerned with maximizing donor assistance and articulating the population's concerns about job opportunities and security.

¶10. (SBU) The mayor of Pol-e Khomri, Mohammad Safar, is originally from Baghlan's Farang district. He graduated from Kabul University's engineering faculty and worked in a variety of government offices and state-owned enterprises before becoming mayor in July 2007. Safar has focused on municipal service delivery and has a budget of approximately USD 1 million. He is particularly focused on paving the city's streets. Following a recent fire in the city, he requested international assistance with the procurement of fire fighting equipment. (Several municipalities in northeast Afghanistan have requested assistance in this regard.)